

## The ants and Mark Twain

By Suchita Malik

I SAT on the couch, lost in the world of Mark Twain, fumbling my way through one of his lesser known articles, 'The Lowest Animal' in an obsolete book of literary essays which I had picked up long back in a sale of rag-tag stuff of second-hand books. A chance selection of a write-up by the author of 'Adventures of Huckleberry Finn' made me literally sit up as I advanced through the pages. Mark Twain's *Lowest Animal* is the 'Man'. I found it unnerving. I tried to protest and reason out with myself the oddity of such observations but, to my dismay, couldn't wriggle out of the dextrous and observant writer's formidable arguments.

As I sat with my muddled thoughts, my eight-year-old son came running and coerced me into looking at the ceiling in one corner. It was full of wee black ants. We hadn't done anything to harm them; why were they there — and in such great numbers — as if a full army had decided to attack? The very idea was chilling.

My husband, who is an animal lover, dropped in just at this moment. He saw them and said, unperturbed, "Don't disturb them if you want to avoid incurring their wrath. They are here for a purpose and will vanish after some time. May be they do so for a few days on a regular basis." His observations were more of an enigma to me. Did he really understand their behaviour? I asked myself. They really disappeared after about half an hour.

The ants appeared again the following day at the same time and place. I once thought of making use of a powerful spray. But I recalled my husband's advice. This time I sat and closely observed them. It was a very large crowd but not unruly. They appeared to be conferencing. It even looked like a political meeting, but their movements were regulated. Their electric activity was enough to put the most diligent of us to shame, lost as they were in a world of their

own. Their objective seemed vague still they were there, running to and fro, but in an amazing straight-line, each pausing for a second to meet its counterpart as if to convey a message or a secret and then nosediving straight ahead.

I was so absorbed in my reverie that I failed to notice their numbers had started thinning out. Their mission complete, they had been going slowly, were going fast and lo! in a jiffy, they were gone. The ceiling was absolutely 'clear' — as if they had never been there. They came for the third day as well. I had started accepting them. But they were not to be seen on the fourth day and thereafter.

This took me back to Mark Twain and his 'lowest animal'. He cites the example of an English earl who killed seventy-two buffaloes for sport whereas an anaconda, when provided with seven preys, killed only one to satisfy his hunger and left the others unharmed. The passion of revenge reigns supreme in the

animal called 'Man' whereas the 'higher animals' live in bliss. Roosters keep harems but by the tacit consent of their concubines unlike Man who indulges in brute force.

Indecency and obscenity remain the prerogative of Man. Animals need no covering since they have nothing to hide and are not ashamed of anything. Man is the only religious animal since the 'higher' animals do not believe in or propagate any religion. Twain cites numerous examples based on his study to prove his point that man, in reality, is the lowest of all animals.

I was judging the truthfulness of his statements against the conduct of ants in my house. How penetrating is Twain's observation that Darwin was wrong in giving the theory of 'Ascent of Man' from the lower animals! In reality, it is 'Descent of Man' from the 'Higher Animals'. I am now more conscious of my lowly place in the universe of living beings.